

# 1 John

This is a simple book about fellowship with God. Yet John strongly emphasizes very challenging ideas about what truly is faith in and fellowship with God. John stresses that there are certain nonnegotiable, basic doctrines that must be held, real actions that must be manifested in genuine love, and attitudes of reverence toward Jesus Christ and obedience to Him that are required to have fellowship with God.

## Setting

1 John was written during the first century of Christianity to refute false teachings about Christianity. John did not write against one false teaching specifically but rather against a general Greek philosophy of dualism that had permeated the Greek way of thinking in the centuries before and after Christ and was now infiltrating the early Church. This philosophical dualism was made popular through the current mystery religions and Plato and, when combined with Christianity, became known as Gnosticism by the second and third century A.D. Thus, if readers are to understand the purpose and message of 1 John, they must first understand the mystery religions and Gnosticism.

## Mystery Religions

Mystery religions were secretive cults in the Greco-Roman world that emphasized esoteric knowledge as the means to gaining enlightenment and salvation. *Esoteric* refers to knowledge from the inner consciousness—the contemplative, mystical, or meditative perspective. It is the hidden or secret meaning. The most famous of these mystery religions were the Eleusinian mysteries started in the 1600s B.C.

The mystery religions believed that there was an all-powerful, perfect god known as The All, which was separate and beyond all of creation. The All was more of a force or energy that permeated the universe and was impersonal and unknowable. The All brought into existence lesser gods who were limited in their power but personal in nature. These lesser gods were known in many ways as angels, spirits, and the gods of the Greek pantheon. One of these lesser gods, called the demiurge, Nous, Reason, or the Dragon, created the material realm as a beautiful piece of art to be admired by the other gods. However, some of these gods admired this creation so much that they became enraptured by their reflection in the waters of the creation and fell into the creation itself to become imprisoned in the material realm. These spiritual beings, trapped in the material realm, became ignorant of their true nature and believed that they were themselves material beings limited in knowledge. This was, according to these religions, the origin of the human race.

The problem with humanity, therefore, is that they are imprisoned in the ignorance of the material realm and have forgotten that they are a part of the greater All. The mystery religions did not view the material realm as evil but that being trapped in it was an evil thing. Consequently, the goal was to learn all the secrets of the universe to gain knowledge, which would then free one from the prison of the material realm and the human condition. This knowledge was obtained by understanding the deeper, hidden, esoteric meanings of mathematics, science, art, and music, which would allow one to completely understand and master nature and the material realm and then escape it, achieving enlightenment and being absorbed into The All. In this, the mystery religions were elitist, and salvation was only for those who had proven themselves as more knowledgeable and skilled than everyone else. Those who did not seek out or have this esoteric

knowledge were ignored and left behind in society—no one could give this knowledge to them; they had to earn it.

## **Gnosticism**

With the spread of Christianity in the Greco-Roman world, many adherents to the mystery religions began to adopt the teachings of Christ and morphed them into a new type of mystery religion that would become known as Gnosticism. *Gnosticism* comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning “knowledge.” Like the mystery religions, Gnostics emphasized esoteric knowledge as the means to salvation. Though similar to the other mystery religions, they were different in the way they viewed the demiurge and creation.

The Gnostics believed that an aeon (a lesser god of The All) by the name of Sophia (wisdom) tried to create her own aeon but became confused and frustrated in the process. She thus produced a flawed, ignorant, and evil megalomaniac by the name of Yahweh (the God of the First Testament). Thinking he was all-powerful and supreme, he decided to create the material realm, but because he was ignorant and evil, the material realm was also made up of ignorance and evil. Thus the spiritual realm was viewed as good, and the material realm was seen as evil. Sophia tried to redeem the material realm by infusing drops of light from The All into the material realm, but this only caused them to become imprisoned in the material realm. These drops of spiritual/god/lights trapped in material bodies were humanity.

Sophia then sent the Serpent (known as Reason or Logos) into the Garden of Eden to give wisdom to Adam and Eve so that they could escape the material realm and become a part of The All again. However, Yahweh became angry and punished Adam and Eve and began to enslave humanity in submission to him and in the ignorance that they were nothing more than humans. Later The All sent another aeon, Christ or the Logos, to teach esoteric wisdom to humanity so that they may find enlightenment. (The God of the Second Testament was seen as The All.) Christ did not come in the flesh since the flesh is seen as evil. Some taught that Christ possessed a man by the name of Jesus in order to teach the people. The Gnostics denied the death and resurrection of Christ since he was not human. This meant that the death and resurrection were not necessary for salvation because the problem with humanity was not sin but ignorance. Some Gnostics taught that Christ tricked Jesus into getting crucified and laughed at his ignorance while he was dying on the cross. The Gnostics also believed that since this world was evil, one must detach himself from the world and from others socially in order to escape it and become one with The All. Because they compartmentalized humans into spiritual and material, they could be very religious yet have no moral sense of right and wrong. Whatever happened with the physical body was unrelated to their spiritual essence.

## **The False Teachers**

Though Gnosticism did not exist in its final form until the third century, its foundational belief—that there is no sin and that humanity can achieve godhood through the teachings of Christ—is the main heresy that John combats in 1 John.

It is not likely that John is talking about one group of well-organized false teachers, rather many different false teachers who have certain characteristics in common. What complicates our discerning who they are is that we only have John’s teachings on the matter—without the false teachers’ teachings. It is like listening to one side of a phone conversation and trying to figure out what the other person is saying.

For John, the characteristics that show the opponents to be false teachers are that, first, that they deny the apostolic authority and teaching of the disciples who walked with Jesus (1 Jn. 1:1-4; 4:6). Second, in regards to their beliefs about Christ, they do not question His Godhood; rather, they question His humanity (1 Jn. 1:1-4; 4:2-3; 2 Jn. 7). The opponents would not have a problem with the claim of Christ as the Son of God; they would have a problem with *Jesus* being Christ the Son of God. For John, one must embrace Jesus Christ as the God-man (1 Jn. 1:3; 2:22-23; 3:8, 23; 4:2-3, 9, 15; 5:1, 10-12, 20; 2 Jn. 7).

Third, they treat sin lightly, either in that they believe they are without sin or in that their sin bears no guilt and is no big deal (1 Jn. 1:6, 8, 10; 2:4, 6; 3:3-6, 7, 9; 5:18; 3 Jn. 11). They also downplay the death of Jesus on the cross both because they deny His humanity and because there was no need for reconciliation for sins (1 Jn. 5:5-6).

Finally, and the worst part for John, is that they fail to show love and take care of their fellow brothers' needs (1 Jn. 2:9; 3:10, 11-12, 14-15, 17-18; 4:8, 20-21) because the opponents love the world more than they love the believers (1 Jn. 2:15-16; 4:1, 5; 2 Jn. 7). Thus the opponents hate the believers just like the world does.

These opponents are trying to deceive the believers and lead them away from the true Jesus Christ (1 Jn. 2:18, 22-23; 4:1-3, 6; 5:5-6, 10; 2 Jn. 7, 9). John writes to encourage the believers to live in accordance with the teachings and life of Jesus Christ and His apostles (1 Jn. 5:13).

## Purpose

The purpose of 1 John is to refute the teachings of the false teachers, but, most importantly, John wants to assure the believers that they do have the truth of who God is and that they can be sure of their salvation. The purpose statement is found in 1 Jn. 5:13: "I have written these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." John is writing to believers to assure them that they do have eternal life, which is neither secretive nor earned.

For John there are two basic components to assurance, both of which are repeatedly emphasized throughout the epistle. First is obedience to God (1 Jn. 3:33-24), which means believing in Jesus Christ as the God-man and showing love to the fellow believers. Second, God has given His Holy Spirit to the believers, which testifies to them that they belong to the Father (1 Jn. 4:13).

John is emphasizing obedience because false teachers have come into the community, teaching false doctrines about God and Jesus and living lives that are not glorifying to God since morality is not important to them. These teachers are opponents of Jesus Christ, and John says they do not really belong to the body (1 Jn. 2:18-19, 4:1).

## Themes

John uses the themes and devices of wisdom literature in order to communicate his ideas. Wisdom literature uses polar opposites (there is *only* right and wrong) with no allowances for gray area or anything between. One is either completely wicked *or* completely righteous; they are not a mixture of both. Psalm 1 is an example of this. The implication is that if anyone has ever taken wicked counsel, done a wicked thing, or made fun of righteous people, then there is *no* righteousness in them. In wisdom literature, if you do not meditate on Scriptures day and night and delight in the Word of God, then you are not righteous at all. Rather, you are wicked, and wicked people cannot stand with the righteous in heaven and therefore will perish. Though a part of us would relate to

this, there is another part of us would say that there is righteousness in us and that we are not always wicked. Wisdom literature is not interested in the gray area of who you are but in the reality of who God is and what it truly means to be with Him. The narrative stories of Abraham, David, and others deal with the gray areas of being human and having a relationship with God. Wisdom literature reminds you to not take sin and obedience lightly in your life even though you are saved by grace. Narrative reminds you that even though you are so wicked and evil, there is the grace of God. Since John is combating the watering down of the gospel, sin, and the need for obedience, he employs wisdom literature to make his points.

### ***Light and Darkness***

In the Bible light is used to symbolize the presence of God and His self-disclosure, purity, and holiness. God's Word is light, and Jesus is the light of the world (Jn. 1:1-14). Darkness is used to symbolize evil, sin, and rebellion against God.

At the beginning of 1 John, the statement is made that "God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all" (1 Jn. 1:5). Here the contrast is set up for the rest of the epistle—that light and darkness cannot coexist. The next verse states that one cannot say he belongs to God yet live in the darkness (1 Jn. 1:6), since these statements contradict each other. With the coming of the light, who is Jesus, 1 Jn. 2:8 says that the darkness is now passing away because the light is shining.

One either belongs to the light or belongs to the darkness and is judged accordingly by God, based on their claims about the Son and their actions of love. 1 Jn. 2:9-11 says that if one makes claims of belonging to God or says that he knows Him but does not live a life of action in the light, then he is a liar. Only those who walk in the light—not those who simply speak of the light—are truly of God. This carries the contrast of what one claims versus what one does. The one who is truly in the light will not stumble (1 Jn. 2:10), whereas the one who is in the darkness is blinded by the darkness and sees and speaks lies (1 Jn. 2:11).

### ***Love and Hate***

If someone truly loves God, then he will obey Him (1 Jn. 2:3), and the love of God is perfected in him (1 Jn. 2:5). Loving God means obeying His commands, especially the command of loving others (1 Jn. 2:7-8). 1 Jn. 2:4 illustrates the opposite: The one who does not truly love God does not keep His commands.

1 Jn. 2:9-11 then develops the love/hate contrast. Those who claim to be "in the light" and yet hate their brother are liars and are still "in the darkness." However, the one who loves his brother is walking in the light and has a right relationship with God.

Love and hate are not opposed to each other; rather, they are two different states. The one who loves the world will not have the love of the Father in him (1 Jn. 2:15). One cannot embrace both love for the world and the Father if he is seeking to be genuine.

1 Jn. 3:11-20 is an illustration of love and hate through the lives of Cain and Abel. 1 Jn. 3:14 draws two conclusions from this: First, we can conclude that love for one's brother is *evidence* of eternal life (1 Jn. 2:3; Jn. 14:15, 21, 23). Thus, we can conclude that those who do not love remain in death (1 Jn. 3:15). He then gives a positive example of how Christ loved us by laying down His life (1 Jn. 3:16), which demonstrated that He was of the light.

In 1 Jn. 4:7-12 and 4:16-5:3 John continues this theme of loving others as the evidence of true belief and knowing God.

## **Belief and Unbelief**

In 1 Jn. 1:6-7 John employs three sets of images that demonstrate genuine belief: *claiming* to have fellowship with God, *living* by the truth, and *walking* in the light. Those who do not do *all* three are walking in the darkness and do not belong to God (1 Jn. 1:5).

1 Jn. 2:3-4 states that if one says he believes in God and knows Him but does not keep His commandments, then he is a liar and the truth is not in him (Jn. 14:23-24). This is demonstrated by the secessionists who made such claims but did not obey God, so they ended up departing, which showed that they did not walk in the light and never belonged (1 Jn. 2:19). However, the genuine believer is “righteous” (1 Jn. 3:7) and is “born of God” (1 Jn. 3:9) because he walks in the light.

The first use of the verb “believe” (*pisteuo*) is in 1 Jn. 3:23, which states that God’s command is to believe in Jesus and to love one another. Thus one will know God and will be assured by the testimony of the Spirit (1 Jn. 3:24). The contrast is further developed in 1 Jn. 5:1, 5, 10, and 12.

With such false belief and lifestyles in the world, John calls the believer to test all spirits to see if they are from God (1 Jn. 4:1). They are to test them with the same criteria that John uses (1 Jn. 2:3-4; 3:23), so that they will not be misled by the darkness.

## **Outline**

- I. Walking in the Light (1:1–3:10)
  - A. The Prologue (1:1-4)
  - B. God Is Light, So We Must Walk in the Light (1:5–2:2)
  - C. Keeping God’s Commandments (2:3-11)
  - D. Words of Reassurance (2:12-17)
  - E. Warning About False Teachers (2:18-27)
  - F. Children of God (2:28–3:10)
- II. Loving One Another (3:11–5:21)
  - A. God Is Love, So We Must Love One Another (3:11-24)
  - B. Testing the Spirits (4:1-6)
  - C. God Is Sacrificial Love (4:7–5:4a)
  - D. Testimony About the Son (5:4b-12)
  - E. Assurance of Eternal Life (5:13-21)

## I. Walking in the Light (1:1–3:10)

The point of the first part of 1 John is that God is light and only those who are light can walk in the light and have fellowship with Him. John is refuting the false teachers when he makes the point that we are not of the light because of our unrighteousness. He then explains how one does become righteous so that they can be in the light and have fellowship with God. For John the only answer is through the sacrifice and atoning blood of Jesus Christ as the God-man.

### A. The Prologue (1:1-4)

John opens his letter by giving his credentials for why the readers should listen to his testimony, rather than that of the false teachers, of who Jesus is. He and others, who can validate his testimony, were with Jesus whereas the false teachers were not. John also begins by arguing that the spiritual, eternal Word, which is God, is also the same Jesus who came in the flesh to minister to humanity. The false teachers would deny that the spiritual Word would actually become flesh.

**1:1** John begins his letter by proclaiming that he has seen Jesus in the flesh, that he has heard, seen, looked at, and touched Jesus. But John also includes others by the use of the pronoun “we”—he was not the only one to testify to the physicality of Jesus and His ministry. There is no doubt for John, the disciples, and others that Jesus came and that He was a real physical man who ministered among them. Not only has John experienced Jesus in the flesh, but he was also there from the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry as well. John is probably picking up off his statement in Jn. 1:14, “the word became flesh” rather than Jn. 1:1, “in the beginning was the word” (1 Jn. 2:7, 24; 3:11; Mk. 1:1-4; Acts 1:21-22).

This provides the context of John’s phrase “the Word of life.” He is referring here to Jesus’ earthly ministry, not to Jesus as the eternal, pre-existent before creation Word of Jn. 1:1, because of the qualifying word “life” that is used here. That John says he was there in the beginning and heard, saw, and touched the Word also clarifies that he is talking about the beginning of Jesus’ ministry on earth.

This phrase “concerning the Word of life” begins a parenthetical statement that gives more explanation to “the Word of life” that they have heard, seen, and touched.

“1:1 This is what we proclaim to you: what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and our hands have touched (concerning the Word of life – 1:2 and the life was revealed, and we have seen and testify and announce to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us).”

**1:2** John continues to testify that the Word of life, which has walked among John and the others, is also the “eternal life” that has always been with the Father; this echoes Jn. 1:1. This is made clear by the word “revealed.” “The eternal Word” of Jn. 1:1 was revealed to the disciples as the earthly “Word of life” that they heard, saw, and touched.

In John’s gospel, he emphasized first Jesus as the eternal, spiritual Word (Jn. 1:1) and then discussed His incarnation<sup>1</sup> (Jn. 1:14) as an introduction to the life of Jesus Christ. However, since the false teachers missed Jn. 1:14, John now first emphasizes the physicality of Jesus on earth and then connects Him to the same eternal, spiritual Word and creator of the universe. This is the first

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<sup>1</sup> The incarnation of Jesus Christ refers to the fact that the spiritual Son of God became human on earth as both God and man. The eternal God of the universe became infleshed in the finite human body. This theological concept of the incarnation of Jesus Christ as equally God and human is unique and central to Christianity.

point that he wants his readers to accept and understand, because without this there is no death and resurrection for their sins.

**1:3** John proclaims *this* Jesus Christ to them so that they may know God and have fellowship with Him and His Son (Jn. 17). The Greek word for “fellowship” used here has the idea of entering into a business partnership with another person. The two people are joined together into fellowship based on shared commitments and common, stated goals that bind them together. Thus, fellowship in the early Church was not hanging out at a coffee shop together but was based on people coming together into partnership and accountability based on a common belief and commitment to God and each other. John and the disciples have fellowship with God because of their common belief in who Jesus Christ is and what He did on the cross. John then states that in order to have fellowship with God, you must share a common belief in certain things about who Jesus Christ is as God’s Son and what He did in His life and, ultimately, on the cross. It is, in the community, this shared belief and accountability to hold it that binds the believers together into fellowship. In contrast, the false teachers’ idea of fellowship with God is based on some personal, relative, and subjective esoteric experience they have had. With theirs, there is nothing objective to bring people into a true community.

The second half of 1:3, “and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ,” is a parenthetical clarification of the nature of the fellowship that John is talking about in verse 1:3a.

1:3 “What we have seen and heard we announce to you too, so that you may have fellowship with us (and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ).”

God has made Himself known through His Son Jesus Christ, who revealed Himself to the apostles. Thus, they have fellowship with God because they have come to accept the truths taught to them by Jesus. By accepting their personal testimony of the manifestation of God in His Son, the believers are able to have fellowship with them, Jesus Christ, and God.

**1:4** The result of having fellowship with this God and Jesus is that our joy may be complete. True fellowship with the Father can only be experienced by believers who have a common belief in and relationship with Jesus Christ, not through some esoteric knowledge of the nature of the universe. Likewise, the false teachers are not interested in the fellowship and joy of their audience but rather in detaching themselves from creation, achieving enlightenment, and losing oneself in the universe. Though what the false teachers offer sounds good intellectually, what John offers through Jesus Christ is far more fulfilling and meaningful. Jesus did not come to bring us enlightenment and position but joy through a real relationship with God and other humans. Deep down, this is what humanity craves more than anything else.

For John, Christianity is rooted in real historical events and truths about Jesus Christ’s life, not in personal experiences. This is the first nonnegotiable theological truth that John proclaims: that the eternal and spiritual Son of God was incarnated as a human and lived on earth. Christianity requires that the historical truths on which it is based be true, for if they are not, then Christianity will fall apart. If Jesus Christ never existed, died, or rose again, then there would be no Christianity (1 Cor. 15:1-19; Heb. 1:1). Yet this is not true with the other religions, which are based primarily on spiritual experiences. If you could prove that Buddha or Hare Krishna never existed and that they were a lie, this would make no difference to a Buddhist or a Hindu. There are those in Christianity who say you can interpret the Bible and the life of Jesus however you want as long as you are very spiritual and devoted about what you believe. Yet the world is full of people who are

very devoted in what they believe but are still very wrong (Hitler, Stalin, David Koresh, etc.). John insists that Christianity is based on historical facts proclaimed by reliable witnesses.

Yet John also makes it clear that Christianity is not based just on doctrines but also on a very real and powerful spiritual experience. John reports the historical facts so that we may have a very personal, experiential, and relational fellowship with God. These truths are not proclaimed in order to create some theological system or institution but so that we may know God. We have fellowship with God and are partnered with Him because of shared values, worldview, goals, and truths—because we have had a real encounter with Jesus Christ the Son of God. This is the root of Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

It is this idea of fellowship that introduces the main idea for what is discussed in 1 John 1-2, which becomes the foundation for everything else discussed in 1 John 3-5. How does one truly have fellowship with God? For John, it is through Jesus Christ as the God-man who died for the sins of the world and was resurrected to give true life, fellowship, and joy.

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<sup>2</sup> See D. A. Carson. *1 John*.

## B. God Is Light, So We Must Walk in the Light (1:5–2:2)

John first establishes the point that God is light (with which the false teachers would agree). Then he presents a series of three claims that the false teachers make and three counterclaims that he states as true about one's relationship to God as light and having fellowship with Him. The three claims begin with "if" (1 Jn. 1:6, 8, 10) and the three counterclaims begin with "but if" (1 Jn. 1:7, 9; 2:1).

False Claim About Fellowship	Truth Claim About Fellowship
Can walk in the light and continue to walk in darkness (1:6)	We must walk in the light through the blood of Jesus Christ (1:7)
Has no guilt of sin (1:8)	Confessing sins brings forgiveness (1:9)
Has not sinned (1:10)	We have an advocate in Jesus (2:1)

For John, this is not about a debate of philosophical views. What is at stake is whether we know this God and can be reconciled to Him. So here John deals with the issue of sin: how it separates us from God and how it can be dealt with so that we can have fellowship and experience Him.

**1:5** The message is that God is light, and there is not one bit of darkness in Him or connected to Him, and darkness cannot come near Him. In Jn. 1:4 Jesus is also called light and is said to be God (Jn. 1:1-2), thus there is no darkness in Jesus either. As mentioned earlier in the discussion of the themes, God being described as light is a description of His character, as one who is pure, righteous, holy, and completely sinless. Darkness, which is any sin or sinful thing has no place in God and so is excluded from having fellowship with Him.

Here John makes it clear that Christianity is not like monism, like what the false teachers believe, where God is everything—good and evil, light and dark, that all things whether good or bad come from God. While there is evil in the world, John is not answering the philosophical questions of why there is evil and where it comes from. Instead he is interested in answering the question of how we gain fellowship with such a holy God when we are darkness and sinners—not how we explain evil, but how we stop being evil.<sup>3</sup>

**1:6** The first false claim made by the false teachers is that one can live according his own definition of morality and still have fellowship with God. For them, God is righteous and truth, but He is also separate from creation. Humanity can determine its own truth and path to God, for everything here in creation is relative and has no true meaning. Salvation is found through knowledge and philosophy, not through an absolute truth and morality or righteousness.

Their teaching is a contradiction, for if God is without sin and there is no darkness in Him, then someone cannot say that they have fellowship with God while living a life of darkness. If they try to maintain this fact, then they are a liar and make Him out to be one as well. This is also violates the teachings of Jesus. The phrase "practicing the truth" (NET, NASB) or "live by the truth" (NIV, RSV) means living out the truth in a lifestyle obedient to God. The most important parallel is Jn. 3:20-21. The problem with the opponents is not in their boast of being enlightened but in their contradictory behavior. They say they follow the teachings of God and Jesus and that both are

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<sup>3</sup> See D. A. Carson. *1 John*.

righteous, but then they do not live their lives according to this standard. Yet, they say it is all right because truth is relative. To know this God is then to be like Him. (Ps. 5; Isa. 59; 2 Cor. 6:14-18).

This presents a problem for the believers, for all humans are sinners (Rom. 3:23) and are full of darkness, which means no one can have fellowship with God or Jesus Christ. Yet John says Christ came so that we could have fellowship with them (1 Jn. 1:3-4).

**1:7** In fitting with wisdom literature, the contrast is between those who do not walk in the light and those who walk in the light without darkness in their lives. The result for those who walk in the light is that they will have true fellowship with God.

But how does one walk in the light if all are sinners? It is through “the blood of Jesus His Son,” which cleanses us of our sin. These words that John has chosen are very incarnational: *Jesus*, the human; his *blood*, which is physical and points to a historical event; and *Son*, which links the physical to the spiritual God. John is not saying that Jesus’ blood is somehow magical but that it is a symbol for life that is violently and sacrificially ended.

This does not mean that we are to be perfect like God; rather, we should live life seeking to do away with sin, and if we do sin, then we are quick to deal with it. This goes back to the word “blameless” used of Zechariah in Lk. 1:5 (Phil. 2:15; 3:6; 1 Thess. 3:13; Heb. 8:7) and the phrase “walked with God,” which described Noah (Gen. 6:9) and Job (Job 1:8). John’s following statement supports this.

The phrase “the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin” refers to sanctification because it follows the continuous action statement of “walking in the light” (Heb. 9:14; 10:2, 22). It is something that we experience after already being in the light. We are only able to experience this while seeking fellowship with God.

“The author is not worried about the initial justification (salvation) of the people to whom he is writing. Rather he is reassuring them about forgiveness of sins committed *after* having become Christians.”<sup>4</sup>

**1:8** The second false claim made by the false teachers is that they are not guilty of sin. The Greek phrase “say we do not have sin” is an expression limited to John’s writings (Jn. 9:41; 15:22, 24; 19:11; 1 Jn. 1:3, 6, 7; 2:28; 3:3, 15, 21; 4:16, 17; 5:12-13) and is difficult to translate. Though many English translations have something like “we have no sin” or are “without sin,” this does not seem to be the idea here since John will make this point in the following verse (1 Jn. 1:10). John uses this phrase in his gospel to refer to someone doing something evil that then results in their being in a state of sin, for which they now bear the guilt of committing a sin. Here John is warning us that we cannot claim to be free from the guilt of that sin even after becoming a believer. It seems that the false teachers were saying that things done by a believer after their conversion were not significant enough to be “sins” that would threaten their fellowship with God.

This is what many people believe—that they are not sinners but just make mistakes or do something wrong every once in a while. They would say it is nothing that they have to feel guilty for, which is just a socially conditioned emotion. John says this person is deceiving himself and is a liar if he says he does not have to feel guilty for explaining darkness away while claiming that he is in fellowship with the God of light. One cannot simply explain their sin and faults away and expect to have a healthy relationship with anyone, let alone a holy God.

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<sup>4</sup> W. Hall Harris. *1, 2, 3 John: Comfort and Counsel for a Church in Crisis*, p. 64.

**1:9** The contrast is that all we have to do is confess our sins, which allows us to be forgiven of our sins and to experience a cleansing of the unrighteous acts that have tainted us. This then allows us to maintain a relationship and intimacy with Jesus. One does not hide his sins in the darkness but confesses them and brings them out into the light to be exposed and cleansed.

Some people think God should forgive them because He is loving and is bound to forgive us. John says that this holy and righteous God forgives us of our sins because “He is faithful and just.” God’s righteousness demands that sin be punished, so He dealt with sin when Jesus Christ died on the cross for sin so that we would not have to. Once again, it is the real historical Jesus, the God-man, and His work on the cross that allows us to have fellowship with God. Just as we came to Jesus the first time by confessing their sins and trusting in His sacrificial blood to cleanse us, so we also do this daily for the sins we commit. Heady philosophical discussions about the nature of existence do not deal with sin.

**1:10** The third false claim made by the false teachers is that they have become perfect and are incapable of committing sin. This is accomplished either because they have ascended above sin through their own works or—the idea that some Christians have—because Jesus’ death not only cleansed them of sin but made them perfect. This is easily refuted by the practicality of asking their spouse or family how perfect they are. The one who believes this claim is calling God a liar because God has made it very clear throughout the Bible that all humans are sinners (Rom. 3:23).

**2:1-2** John begins the counterclaim with the parenthetical statement, “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin.” John is not emphasizing that we are sinners to excuse our behavior or to rob us of any hope of changing but to encourage us to cling to Jesus as our advocate so we can experience God and have the incredible experience having a relationship with Him. Our goal is not to sin so that we can walk in the light and maintain fellowship with God. Since this is, however, impossible for us as sinners to do all the time, we have Jesus who will plead our case before the Father because He has borne God’s wrath against sin for us. Just as the sacrifice and atoning blood of Jesus is the only way into fellowship with God, it is also the only way to stay in fellowship with Him.

Our sins are taken away through the work of Jesus Christ and not by our own deeds. All our sins are taken care of, as well as all of those in the world. The amazing part of Jesus’ death on the cross is that He took care of all sins whether the person believes in Him or not. Jesus provided salvation that is sufficient for all, though it is effective only for those who trust in Him (2 Cor. 5:14-15, 19; Heb. 2:9; Rev. 22:17).

The “atoning sacrifice” (NET, NIV) or “propitiation” (NASB) or “expiation” (RSV) is a difficult and even controversial word. “Expiation,” “propitiation,” and “atonement” have all been suggested. Propitiation is when one does something to make God favorable toward them. The way that this has been traditionally understood in the western church is that God was angry with us because of our sin. But God in His mercy sent His Son to die for us to make God favorable toward us. This was the dominant view in the church until the 1930s, when people began to say that this sounded a lot like paganism, wherein you are always trying to do something to earn the favor of the gods so that they would give you what you want, like healthy crops and children. So how can one say that the Son is trying to make God favorable when it was God’s idea to send His Son? This led people to see Jesus’ death as expiation, which is when God cancels the debt of sin because

Jesus paid it. Still others responded by saying that the Bible does speak of the wrath of God on humanity for its sin.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the best way to understand this verse is that it is both propitiation and expiation. Because God is so holy and righteous, He hates sin, and His anger is against us for our rebellion—much like a parent's anger at a child for intentional disobedience (propitiation). However, God does not lose His temper; He is love and never stops loving us—like a parent's love for a child despite their disobedience—and cancels our debt of sin and forgives us (expiation). So He sent his Son to die for us to appease His wrath against the sin in the world and to cancel our debt so that we could be forgiven. In paganism, humans sacrificed in hopes of appeasing the gods; in Christianity, God provides the sacrifice to pay the debt for sin to appease Himself so that we do not have to. Thus, in 1 John 2:2 God is both the subject and object of propitiation. He is the one who is angry with us and He is the one who loves us enough to send His Son as a sacrifice for us. His wrath is poured out on His Son for us.

“If the readers are to have fellowship with the Father and with the Son (v. 3), they must understand what makes this possible. They must know who God is in himself and, consequently, who they are in themselves as creatures of God. So the author first describes the moral character of God in terms of light (v. 5) and then goes on to deny three claims made by those who falsely boast of their knowledge and fellowship with God. The false positions are (1) moral behavior is a matter of indifference in one's relationship to God (v. 6); (2) immoral conduct does not issue in sin for one who knows God (v. 8); and (3) the knowledge of God removes sin as even a possibility in the life of the believer (v. 10). True 'tests' or evidence of fellowship with God or walking in the light are (1) fellowship with one another (v. 7), with subsequent cleansing by the blood of Christ; (2) confession of sin, (v. 9) which brings both forgiveness and cleansing; and (3) trusting that if we sin we have Jesus Christ as an advocate and sacrifice for our sins (2:2).”<sup>6</sup>

The second major theological point that John makes is that the death of Christ is necessary in order for a holy God to have fellowship with humanity. Since God is righteous and holy and humanity is not, something needed to be done to change this so that humanity could have fellowship with Him. If humans are sinners, then there is nothing that they will ever be able to do on their own that can make themselves righteous and holy and become like God. Therefore, only God can step down into history and our lives and make us righteous and holy. Only through the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus can our debt for sin be paid, and only through His blood can we be cleansed. This is why only He can plead our case when we sin and enable us to walk in the light.

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<sup>5</sup> See D. A. Carson. *1 John*.

<sup>6</sup> Glenn W. Barker. “1 John” in *Hebrews-Revelation*, Vol. 12 of *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 309.

### C. Keeping God's Commandments (2:3-11)

This section emphasizes the need for obedience to God in order to walk in the light and maintain our fellowship with Him. This section contains three claims of knowing God, expressed by the participle “the one who says” at the beginning of 1 John 2:4, 6, and 9. These participles indirectly reflect the claims of the opponents. Each claim is followed by the evidence that must be seen in the life of the person who is making the claim in order for the claim to be true. This section makes a distinction between those who talk and make claims about knowing God and those who perform and truly know God.

Claim to Know God	Condition for Truth of Claim
One has come to know God (2:4a)	Keep Christ's commandments (2:4b-5)
One resides in God (2:6a)	Walk as Christ walked (2:6b)
One is in the light (2:9a)	Love one's brother (2:9b-11)

**2:3** In order for one to truly say that they have come to know God they must obey the commandments of Christ. It is not enough to say that Jesus Christ was a great spiritual teacher and to quote him in your life. Nor can someone say he understands the deeper, esoteric meaning of Christ's words if they do not live out the obvious truths of His teachings. Jesus made it clear that the only way you can know God and Him is if you obey Him (Matt. 28; Jn. 14:15, 21-24).

**2:4-5** One cannot say that he knows God and then disobey everything that Jesus Christ said they must do in order to have a relationship with Him. If one says this, then they do not really know God and the teachings of His Son and thus they are a liar. If one is not obeying Jesus Christ's teachings, then there is something wrong in their relationship with God. In contrast, for those who obey Jesus Christ's words, the love of God is perfected in them as a result.

John is not saying that God demands perfection, for he has already made it clear that we are sinners. Nor is he saying that we can earn God's love. Rather, we strive to obey God, and when we fail, we repent and confess our sins to Him because our relationship and need to obey Him is important to us. Even repenting of sins is obedience to God. To know God is to have a reciprocal relationship with Him (Jn. 14:15, 21-24). John is warning against the view that to know God is a warm, fuzzy feeling, a sensation, or just moving worship.

“John's point was that our personal experiential knowledge of God will affect the way we live, and the way we live, obediently or disobediently, will reveal how well we really know God.”<sup>7</sup>

**2:6** In the second claim John moves deeper, from knowing God to actually residing or remaining in Him, which communicates perseverance. Jesus Christ remained in the Father and demonstrated it by walking in obedience to the Father. Christ then commanded us to walk in obedience to Him in the same way He did if we were to remain in Him and God (Jn. 15:1-17). Thus obedience is a continual thing in the life of the one who resides in God; it is a lifestyle.

**2:7-8** John makes the point that obeying God is not a new command or idea because he probably was accused of changing from preaching grace to now emphasizing obedience. The old command that has been around since the beginning is to love God and one another (Deut. 6:4-6; Lev. 19:18).

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on 1 John*, p. 19.

This is identified by the phrases “from the beginning” and “the word that you already heard.” All the laws in the Mosaic Law could be summed up in these two commands, for when you obeyed the laws you were loving God and loving others. However, in a way it is a new command because Jesus repeated it to them during His earthly ministry in the context of His death and resurrection. His death and resurrection allowed for the Holy Spirit to indwell the believers and give them the ability to fulfill this command in a more self-sacrificing way (Matt. 22:34-40; Jn. 13:34-35). It is also new with John because he is untwisting the interpretation of the command on the part of the false teachers who taught a false definition of love, which had more to do with everyone just getting along.

**2:9-11** The third claim begins with the negative and states that if one is in the light of God (Jn. 1:5), then they must not hate their brother. The word brother does not mean a sibling but a fellow believer and can mean either a male or female believer. The phrases “in the light” and “still in the darkness” are an allusion to Jn. 3:17-21. According to John, a person either comes to the light or remains in the darkness; for John there are no alternatives.

The contradiction is that the false teachers say we can be in the light of God but that how we treat others does not matter because knowledge is really the point. However, the First and Second Testament are very clear when they state that true sacrificial love is what is demanded of a believer (Jn. 4:7-21).

The third major theological point that John makes is God being light and Jesus Christ paying for our sins through His sacrificial death demand that we obey them. For John, keeping Christ’s commandments is equal to the commandment to love one’s brother, which is what Christ did. Thus, the conditions for the truth of one’s claims, as shown above, are synonymous, which would make knowing God, remaining, and living in the light synonymous. For John, there is no genuine faith without these claims and conditions in one’s life; Christ must be Lord of one’s life to authenticate salvation. This is the evidence of the grace of God accepted by faith working out in the believer’s life.

## D. Words of Reassurance (2:12-17)

After the deep emphasis on correct beliefs and the need to obey God, John pauses briefly to encourage us that resisting the false teachings and enticements of the world is worth the sacrifice, hardship, and perseverance.

In 1 John the term “little children” refers to the whole group of recipients of the letter rather than a select group within it (1 Jn. 2:1, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21). Thus, in 1 Jn. 2:12-14 there are not three distinct groups being addressed, but the whole group (“little children”), followed by two subgroups (“fathers” and “young people”). These two subgroups seem to be distinguished by age and spiritual maturity.

It seems that John also desires to unite the older and younger believers into one mindset of pursuing Jesus Christ and resisting the world. It could be that the older believers have grown tired in their perseverance in the truths that John has been emphasizing, while the younger believers are energetic and passionate but not as discerning when it comes to new teachings.

**2:12-13** Addressing the whole group as children of God, John declares that what binds them all together is that their sins have been forgiven through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. He encourages the fathers (older believers) to persevere in the knowledge of what they have known from the beginning. He encourages the young people that their true strength and victory are found in the truth that they have conquered the evil one through their faith in Jesus Christ—not in the new ideas that the world presents. John uses the phrase “the evil one” to refer to Satan (Jn. 17:15; 1 Jn. 2:14; 3:12; 5:18, 19).

**2:14** John repeats his encouragement to the “children” with the addition of the phrase “word of God” in reference to the young people. This clarifies that their strength is in the truths found in the Word of God and not in the ideas of the world. John’s repetition of the three phrases in 1 Jn. 2:12-14 emphasizes how important these truths are for them and that they are the basis for what they believe.

**2:15** John then reminds them that is God is light, that there is no darkness in Him (1 Jn. 1:5), and that the world and any part of it are darkness (Jn. 1:1-14). Therefore, the believers should not love the world or anything in it, for if they do, then they do not belong to the Father. No one can walk in the light with God as their master and in the darkness with the world as their master at the same time (Matt. 6:24). The word “world” does not refer to the world in the sense of the planet and the people who live on it, rather the moral order, human beings in defiant rebellion against God, and the philosophies, ideas, and worldviews that are opposed to the truths of God found in the Bible.

**2:16** John warns against pursuing the world and its ways because everything in the world will eventually pass away. Not only will God one day destroy the things of the world that do not conform to His image and will, but He will then redeem and renew the world into His own image. John lists three categories into which the things of the world fall: the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life.

The word “flesh” refers to all the human experiences and desires that are not conformed to the will of God. It describes “human nature incapable of attaining to God unless it is re-created by His Spirit.”<sup>8</sup> It is seeking our own will and desires instead of that of God’s.

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<sup>8</sup> R. Brown. *The Epistles of John*, p. 326.

The phrase “the desire of the eyes” refers to the sinful cravings that are activated by what man sees, which leads to coveting them. It is about accruing material things for one’s own desires rather than to benefit others.

The phrase “the pride of life” refers to boasting about possessions, accomplishments, or status. This person places his confidence in those things to ensure his security and significance without the need for God.

**2:17** Here John states that there are those who love the world and those who love the Father. Just as the things of the world will pass away, so will the one who loves the things of the world rather than God. Since the love of God is not in them, they will pass away along with the world, for only the Father is eternal. One must remain in the Father in order to not pass away.

There are differences between God loving the world in Jn. 3:16 (God so loved the world He gave His only unique Son) and here, where John commands us to not love the world. First God loves the world with the holy love of redemption, while we are not to love it with our selfish love of participation. Second God loves the world in order to save sinners, while we are not to love the world so as to share in their sin. Third God’s love for the world inspires all at God’s condescension, while our love for the world evokes disgust at our lust.<sup>9</sup>

The fourth major theological point that John makes is that love for God and obedience to His will means that we are not to love the world and surrender to its way of think, desires, and pursuits. The one who truly has fellowship with God finds satisfaction and contentment in Him and thus does not need the things of the world.

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<sup>9</sup> See D. A. Carson. *1 John*.

## E. Warning about False Teachers (2:18-27)

Now that John has clearly laid out what it means to have fellowship with God, He now warns against those false teachers who come from the world's thinking and seek to lead the people of God out of the light and fellowship of God and into the darkness. The two categories here are those who are antichrist and those who follow Christ.

**2:18** The “last hour” is the same as “the last days,” which refers to the time between Jesus Christ's first and second comings (Acts 2:17; Heb. 1:2; Jn. 5:24-28, 6:39-40, 11:24). The “day of the Lord” is the tribulation and the second coming. John states that in the years before the second coming of Christ (“last hour”), more antichrists or false teachers will come than there were before his first coming. Thus it is more important than ever to know what it really means to know God, walk in the light, and be on our guard against those who teach a false message. An antichrist is one who stands in the place of Christ and His teachings and seeks to deceive people into following a false path (Mk. 13:22; 1 Jn. 2:26; 2 Jn. 7).

**2:19** The “they” in this verse are the false teachers discussed in 1 John 1. John states that if they truly knew God and were in fellowship with Him and the other believers they would have not left the fellowship of the believers. That they were unable to love their brothers and sisters shows that they never truly belonged. Real Christians stick it out and persevere in the faith and fellowship with God (Matt. 13:1-23; Jn. 8; 14; Heb. 3:14; Jam. 1:2-8).

What is important to note is that the antichrists here are not global political figures but ones who were part of the church. The true danger is not some celebrity or politician that people label an antichrist but the teachers in the church who are known and respected, which makes it harder to discern their lies and confront them.

**2:20-21** Unlike the antichrists, we have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and therefore have the truth of Jesus Christ's teachings and can discern the lies of the false teachers (Lk. 4:18; Jn. 6:69, 14:17, 15:26, 16:13; Acts 10:38; Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:13; 2 Cor. 1:21-22). He writes these words in order to assure us that we indeed do belong to the Father.

**2:22-23** John states that the antichrist is, first, the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ. For John this means Jesus as the God-man who died and rose again for the sins of the world. Anyone who teaches against Jesus being God, man, and savior is an antichrist. Second, the antichrist is the one who denies that God the Father and Jesus Christ His Son are the same and that the Father sent the Son; if you deny this Jesus Christ, then you are also denying the Father and do not belong to God.

**2:24-26** John once again makes it clear that remaining in *this* Jesus Christ and these truths is necessary for eternal life. The marks of a true believer are embracing the truth of who God and His Son are and persevering in this truth intellectually and experientially (Jn. 15:10).

**2:27** Those who hold to *this* teaching do not need any further secret teaching or understanding of the gospel message. The message is simple: The Father sent Jesus Christ the God-man to die for the sins of the world so that we could become the children of God, transformed into His image through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It is His Word and Spirit that guide us, not the philosophies of the world. There are no “inside track” teachers, no mediators, so that they become as god to you. The time of the people being dependent on the tribal leaders for the truth of what they should believe is over, for God has given His Spirit to all to know the truth and God (Jer. 31:31-34; Heb. 1:1-4).

The fifth major theological claim is that believers are to be discerning of the teachers and teachings that come into the Church. John has wrapped obedience, right doctrine, spiritual anointing, and love for the brothers all into one package and made them all dependent on each other.

## F. Children of God (2:28–3:10)

In this section John insists that those who are born again in the Father as His children demonstrate a new birth obedience (1 Jn. 3:4-10) and love (1 Jn. 3:11-18) in Jesus Christ. The world accuses us of not acting like Christ, and in a way they are right; a true child of God will act like his Father. In most of the religions in the world, there is no connection between moral ethics and religious commitment. It is because Christianity has done such a great job in making this connection that the secular world expects it from us.

**2:28-29** Here John refers to the believers as children to communicate both the fact that we have a new birth and that we belong to God the Father. In the ancient world the son would always grow up and do whatever the father did. Consequently, John uses sonship language here to communicate the idea that if you are the child of God through the new birth in Jesus Christ, then you will start doing what the Father does because His Holy Spirit is in you. Those who have a new birth will grow up in Jesus Christ to be righteous like the Father through the transformation of the Holy Spirit. Thus when we are not acting like Him, there is something wrong with who we say we are. John wants you to understand that you are a new creature in a new birth because you have a new Father; therefore, you should function in this new birth in the Father.

The desire for righteousness and holiness is the mark of truly being born again. This does not mean we are free from temptation and sin, rather that we understand sin better, so we are horrified and ashamed of it and thus determined to deal with it. This is why we feel more guilt than those in the world do.

**3:1** 1 Jn. 3:1-3 is a parenthetical statement that elaborates on what it means in 1 Jn. 2:29 to be fathered by God. Because we belong to the Father and not the world, we should be thinking and living so drastically differently from the world that it does not recognize us as being a part of the world—in the same way that it did not recognize Jesus (Jn. 1:1-14). This will lead it to either wanting what we have or hating us, as John will discuss later.

**3:2-3** Though the Father demands obedience, John knows that we are not yet what we are intended to be. We are children of God and still have growing to do, so there will still be some inconsistencies in who we are as His children and what we do. But because we are His children, there should be growth and a desire to grow. We will finally be full-grown when Jesus Christ returns for us.<sup>10</sup> John does not expect perfection but a desire to know the Father and Jesus Christ and to obey and live life in the way Jesus Christ demonstrated and commanded us to do. It is this desire and hope of being like Jesus Christ and seeing Him one day that bring purification for our sins. Those who desire Him will seek to obey and will repent when they fail, which will make them more like Christ.

“The author wants his readers to know that approval by the world is to be feared, not desired. To be hated by the world may be unpleasant, but ultimately it should reassure the members of the community of the faith that they are loved by God, which is far more important than the world’s hatred.”<sup>11</sup>

**3:4** The word “lawlessness” (*anosmia*) carries the connotation of wickedness (Matt. 7:23, 13:41, 24:2; 2 Thess. 2:7). It means the rejection of the law, a willful opposition to God, rather than just breaking His law. This is presented in stark contrast to “everyone who resides in Him” (1 Jn. 3:6). However, for John “lawlessness” is not a violation of the Mosaic Law, since he is writing to

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<sup>10</sup> See D. A. Carson. *1 John*.

<sup>11</sup> Glenn W. Barker. “1 John” in *Hebrews-Revelation*. Vol. 12 of *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, p. 330.

believers. The “law” for the author is the law of *love*, given by Jesus in Jn. 13:34-35 as the new commandment. The command to love one’s brother is a major theme of 1 John, and the lack of it is the one specific sin mentioned in the entire letter and with which the opponents are charged (1 Jn. 3:17).

**3:5** In the remaining verses John makes two points about what a life of obedience to Jesus Christ means (1 Jn. 3:5-10). First, the purpose of Christ’s coming was to oppose sin in every way. You demonstrate who your father is by the way that you live. The Bible makes it clear that we are all born spiritually dead in our sins and therefore belong to the devil, our father (Rom. 6). The Bible never talks about new birth in the devil, only in Jesus Christ through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Jesus came in order to free us from slavery to sin; therefore, we should not re-enslave ourselves (Rom. 6). Since this is why the believer has come to Christ, it would be foolish and illogical for one to live in lawlessness.

**3:6** The second point about what a life of obedience to Jesus Christ means is that the children of God do not sin (1 Jn. 3:6, 9). There are three views of what John means by “do not sin.”

### **View One: The Superior Believer**

The author is distinguishing between “ordinary” believers (1 Jn. 1:8-2:2), who can and do occasionally sin and need forgiveness, and “superior” believers (1 Jn. 3:6, 3:9), who really do live up to their position in Christ and do not sin. This is based on the assumption that 1 Jn. 3:6 and 3:9 do not really describe the “average” believer, rather the one who truly walks in close fellowship with Christ—since in Him there is no sin (1 Jn. 3:5), the believer is therefore without sin. However, this is not possible because it contradicts John’s statement in 1 Jn. 1:10-2:2. Likewise, the author uses the word “everyone” (1 Jn. 3:3, 4, 6, 9, 10) to refer to the two different kinds of people; there is no exception of a third category anywhere in his epistle.

### **View Two: Habitual Sin as a Lifestyle**

There is a distinction between individual acts of sin (which a believer may occasionally commit) and habitual sin as a lifestyle (a pursuit of sin that John says is not possible for the believer) that has been suggested on grammatical grounds by a number of interpreters. They argue for a distinction between the aorist past tense in 1 Jn. 2:1, referring to individual acts of sin, and the present tense in 1 Jn. 3:6 and 3:9, referring to a lifestyle of habitual sin. These verses would thus be stating that true believers will not pursue a lifestyle of habitual sin, even though they are still sinners and will still commit sins. However, it is questionable that John would rest a distinction so crucial to his argument on a variation in tenses (especially given his fondness for switching tenses for purely stylistic reasons).

### **View Three: Fully Transformed Children of God Do Not Sin**

This not an ontological statement—that believers cannot sin by nature—but describes what is theologically true of being a true child of God. True children of God do not sin because their Father does not sin. Though this is not true of us by nature because we are still sinners (1 Jn. 1:10-2:2). However, we have been declared to be righteous and without sin through the blood of Christ and are being transformed into that through the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8: 1-4; 12:1-2). In the same way, a parent saying, “there is no lying in my house,” does not mean no one lies, rather what should be true of those who live in their house. Thus John uses wisdom literature to force us to live with the tension in our lives—that children of God do not sin, yet we do to make us struggle

and persevere to become what we have been declared to be. The final resolution comes when Jesus Christ comes back, when, as children of God now fully transformed, we will not sin. The only way that this is possible is by walking in the light through the blood of Jesus Christ (1 Jn. 1:5-7), evidenced by our obedience (1 Jn. 2:3-6). Therefore the true believer perseveres to become what they have been declared by God to be through Jesus Christ.

This is most likely the correct view and is similar to Jesus' statement in Matt. 5:20. The Pharisees were known for perfectly following the Law as far as the people were concerned, yet they were not transformed on the inside (Matt. 23:27). By calling people to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees, Jesus makes the point that one must perfectly follow and obey the Law in order to enter the kingdom of God (Ps. 1; 1 Cor. 6:9). The only way that we can be righteous though is through our transformation by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 12:1-2) made possible by the blood of Christ (1 Jn. 1:7).

**3:7-10** Once again John uses sonship language in order to contrast those who belong to Jesus and those who belong to the devil. This is determined by whether one lives righteously and loves others as Christ did and as the devil does not. People are revealed for their behavior and the desires and lifestyles they pursue. The one who pursues his own desires and sin is of the devil (Jn. 14:24), but the one who pursues righteousness and God's will belongs to God (Jn. 13:35 14:21, 23; 15:10, 14, 17; 17:21). Notice the continuous action verbs here are "practicing" (NET, NASB) and "continuing" (NIV).

"The absence of righteous behavior in a life indicates the absence of intimacy with God. Likewise the absence of love for one's Christian brother shows that the individual who does not love has little fellowship with God. Love is the most important particular manifestation of righteous behavior."<sup>12</sup>

The sixth major theological claim is that true believers think and act like their Father. If we truly have been born again through the death and resurrection of Christ, then the Spirit of God is transforming us into the image of God. Though our sins are forgiven by God and we are declared to be righteous before God positionally, this fact does not in itself change us. It is only when this is united with our submission to the Holy Spirit does our transformation into what God has declared us to be begin to happen. This is why Biblical Christianity demands righteousness from those who belong God; God's declaration of justifications leads to sanctification. Therefore, we should be sinning less and less throughout our life, until our death or when Jesus Christ comes back and we truly are a child of God, ontologically by nature.

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on 1 John*, p. 41.

## **II. Loving One Another (3:11–5:21)**

In the first half of John's letter is emphasized the necessity of believing correctly about who Jesus is, what He has done, and the need to respond in obedience as the children of God. Now John unpacks the idea that obedience looks like self-sacrificing love in the same way that Jesus Christ demonstrated love by dying for our sins. This kind of love and obedience can only be accomplished by being fathered by God when we receive the Spirit through our trust in Jesus Christ as the God-man. And when this love begins to grow in our lives it is a testament that that we know and reside in God because we have truly been fathered by Him and born again.

### **A. God Is Love, So We Must Love One Another (3:11-24)**

1 Jn. 3:10-12 are transitional sentences between the theme of obedience in the previous section (1 Jn. 2:28-3:10) and the theme of love in this current section (1 Jn. 3:11-24). John uses the phrases the "children of the devil" (1 Jn. 3:10) and "who was of the evil one" (1 Jn. 3:12) and the mention of "love" (1 Jn. 3:10) as transitional phrases. John makes the emphatic point that if we are truly the children of God than we must love one another because God our Father is love.

**3:11-12** The heart of the gospel message is that we should love because we are the children of God who demonstrated love (1 Jn. 2:28-3:10). John uses Cain as an example of one who was not fathered by God and belonged to the devil because he had no love for his brother first in his heart and then in his actions by killing Abel. Though murder seems like an extreme example of not loving Cain's lack of love began with jealousy of his brother who was righteous because he was fathered by God.

**3:13** Just as Abel was hated for demonstrating love, so will we in this world because those who remain in the darkness do not understand us (Jn. 15:18-21, 16:1-4).

**3:14** The first assurance of our new birth is that we love and care about people in a way that we had never done before. Yes it is true that non-believers care for people but they are only interested in caring for another unless they are cared for as well. Though we will still love in selfish ways we will begin to selflessly love others more and more as we walk with Christ. Our ability to look at our life and see that we are selflessly loving people more and more can be assurance of our regeneration (Matt. 5). As true children of God we live with the tension of knowing that we are not what we ought to be but we know that we are not what we used to be. We should see obedience and love where there was none before.

**3:15** John pushes the definition of murder further. Though most would not feel that they can relate to being a murder like Cain (1 Jn. 3:12), John makes us relate by connecting murder with hatred. The one who is guilty of hatred is also guilty of murder. If one nurtures hatred in their heart then eventually this will lead to actions. Eventually your words and actions will tear the other down and may then lead to taking their life. Everyone knows that what we say to people or ignoring people can be more damaging to the soul than taking their life. One cannot love another if they have hatred for that person.

**3:16-17** John then pushes the definition of love further. Love is not just a warm fuzzy feeling for people or being nice to people but love is Christ's sacrifice of self-denial and self-sacrifice. True love is the willingness to sacrifice your body, mind, emotions, desires, time, and energy to benefit and build up another without any desire to get anything in return. We are called not to shut off our compassion to others if we have the means (Jn. 13:34; 15:12-13). John pushes the definition of love again from hatred to apathy for others or being too busy to show compassion or give help to

another. This is the most basic way that people feel loved and so to deny them this is the same as murdering them because they will “die” of rejection, isolations, and loneliness.

“Most people associate Christianity with the command to love, and so they think that they know all about Christianity when they have understood its teaching in terms of their own concept of love. John found it necessary to explain clearly to his readers what he meant by love... Love means readiness to do anything for other people.”<sup>13</sup>

**3:18** Being in the truth means living a life of truth, not just in words but also in action, for this is how we truly love. For John the truth is the theological truths mentioned earlier of Jesus as the God-man (1 Jn. 1:1-4) who died for humanity (1 Jn. 1:5-2:2) and therefore the believer should respond in obedience and love (1 Jn. 2:3-11). By doing these righteous deeds, demonstrating love for one another, we assure ourselves that we belong to the truth, because the outward action reflects the inward reality of our relationship with God. Conduct is proof of paternity.

**3:19-20** The second assurance of new birth is our prayer life. The “by this” (1 Jn. 3:19) refers to the truth that John referred to in 1 Jn. 3:11-18. Our tangible acts of love should comfort and assure us of our relationship with God when our conscience condemns us for not fully being who we ought to be in Christ. Our prayer life of coming before God and talking with Him and desiring to know Him assures us that we belong to God. We know that even though we are not perfect that God will accept and forgive us even if our own consciences are guilty. Because God knows all things He will not show partiality but will be more objective in judgment than our own conscience. He will be merciful to those who (as believers) have loved their fellow Christians, but He will be severe toward those (the opponents) who have failed to love their fellow believers (Matt. 25:31-46).

**3:21-22** If our conscience is clear (1 Jn. 3:21) and we are keeping God’s commandments (1 Jn. 3:22b), then our will and God’s will coincide, and thus we may reasonably expect to receive the answers to our requests (1 Jn. 5:14-1). However, if there is the sin of disobedience or hatred then our relationship with God will be hindered. Try to pray when there is a secret sin it will not happen. Either prayer will drive you away from sin or sin will drive you from prayer.

**3:23-24** John then reminds us that true love (1 Jn. 3:11-18) and knowing God (1 Jn. 3:19-122) are found in the theological truths mentioned at the beginning of the letter that the true believer trust in Jesus Christ as the God-man (1 Jn. 1:1-4) and loves one another as Christ did (1 Jn. 2:3-11). Notice that these two criteria are mentioned in conjunction to each other not that the second can follow at a latter time. As a result we will reside in Him and He will reside in us and through the indwelling of the Spirit we may have assurance that we have eternal life.

The seventh major theological claim is that believers are to love others because God is love and we belong to Him. This has been the message of God all throughout the First Testament (Deut. 6:4-9; Lev. 19:18) and in the Second Testament (Matt. 22:37-40). If this is who God is and has demonstrated love through the sending of His Son to atone for our sins that this should be a necessary part of our life as we reflect Him in obedient love as His children.

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<sup>13</sup> I. Howard Marshall. *The Epistles of John*, p. 192.

## B. Testing the Spirits (4:1-6)

John introduced the idea of the Spirit at the end of the previous section (1 Jn. 3:24) and how His residing in us is a testimony to knowing God. He uses this idea to transition into the topic of spirits and how to test whether they are from God. Today *spiritual* is such a buzzword and a feel-good idea. Everyone wants to be spiritual, and everyone is following a spiritual (spirit) idea. It is easy to confuse the transcendental and lofty with what is spiritual. Spirituality is something vague, having some feeling of the transcendental. For John, however, the spiritual realm is full of deceiving spirits, and there is only one true Spirit rooted in the concrete and objective Word of God.

**4:1** Here John links spirits and human prophets together. John warns that just as the physical realm is a dangerous place with ill-intentioned people, so the spiritual realm is a dangerous place with ill-intentioned spirits. His mention of false prophets should make us recall the tests of the First Testament of whether a prophet proclaims God as the only God (Deut. 13:1-3) and speaks accurately regarding His will (Deut. 18:22). John most likely has in mind the first test of whether someone proclaims God and His Son (1 Jn. 4:2).

**4:2-3** The first test is that every spirit or prophet must proclaim that Jesus Christ came “in the flesh.” These three words are very intentional and precise. The Gnostics said that Jesus was a human who had the Christ/divine/spirit come upon him at his baptism and then left him right before his crucifixion. For the Gnostic Christ has no flesh. John puts the two together into one name—Jesus (human) Christ (Spirit)—and says that they are the same person from birth to death and through ascension. And just in case it was not clear, he adds that the one being with two names came in the flesh. Anyone who denies this is an antichrist. Even though *the* antichrist has not come into the world, the spirit, ideas, and mission of what is an antichrist is here.

Even today many false teachers divorce Jesus from Christ. Jesus is seen as a great teacher who achieved Christ-consciousness through esoteric knowledge. Christ-consciousness is often used to refer to a person’s realization and attainment that he or she is god. When the believers form their statement of faith, they must be specific and in agreement with the Word of God to leave no doubt as to what are false teachings when they come into the community of believers.

**4:4** We have gained victory over the false spirits, no matter how powerful and influential they may seem, because we possess the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is greater than that which is in the world. It is up to us to not place our lives and thinking in the hands of one who is the enemy and who has already been conquered.

**4:5** Just as John had warned to not love the world (1 Jn. 2:15-17), he now states that these false teachers represent the world and are the ones who lead the world with their ideas. The false teachers and those who follow them will pass away with the world (1 Jn. 2:17).

“The term ‘world’ (*kosmos*) is probably to be understood in two ways: as a system of thought antithetical to Christian belief and as a description of those members of the community who were led astray by false teachers. That some members of the community were easily persuaded to forsake the truth of the gospel should not bewilder the faithful.”<sup>14</sup>

**4:6** The second test is in whether or not one holds to the teachings of the apostles. The “us” reflects back on the “we” in 1 Jn. 1:1-4, which refers to the apostles who have heard, seen, and touched the incarnate Jesus. Here, 1 Jn. 3:6 says that one listens to their teachings, which not only means hearing but obeying. According to the context, the teachings are to love God and love others.

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<sup>14</sup> Glenn W. Barker. “1 John” in *Hebrews-Revelation*, Vol. 12 of *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, p. 341.

John sounds as if he's saying that if you agree with him then you are right, which might sound very arrogant. He does *not* say, however, that no matter what he preaches to you, if you do not believe it then you are damned. What he is saying is that all beliefs must match up with the apostolic teaching. These teachings are rooted in the First Testament, fulfilled and taught by Christ, and given to a community of apostles (Gal. 1). There have been so many people who have believed the same thing about God and the messiah throughout history. One can recognize an apostolic mind by poring over and devouring the Word of God. Truly spiritually minded people love to meditate on and grow in the Word (1 Jn. 17:17). The false teachers are always throwing out the testimony of the community and the Word of God and pointing to their own esoteric, subjective, and unverifiable ideas.<sup>15</sup>

This generation does not want a God to whom we are reconciled but rather a God who is a powerful genie. The idea is that they pay homage to him, but at the end of the day they still hold to their freedom in their own personal spirituality and that God serves them. They do not want to know the right thing to believe; they want to know if it is practical, if it will make them feel good, and if it will give them a spiritual experience. However, at the end of the day, if you do not have people who understand the truth and the truthfulness of the truth, you will never establish solid Christian businesses, churches, and countries because their beliefs will always be shifting under them. John is not concerned with just the righteous lifestyle of the believer; he also wants them to be aware of whom they are following. He wants them to test leaders and make sure that they are teaching Christ correctly and living a righteous life as well so that their lives may be rooted in a trustworthy and solid foundation.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See D. A. Carson. *1 John*.

<sup>16</sup> See D. A. Carson. *1 John*.

## C. God Is Sacrificial Love (4:7–5:4a)

John uses the phrase “knows God” (1 Jn. 4:6-7) to transition from the previous section to this one and continues to develop the idea of love that he began in 1 Jn. 3:11-24. After establishing that God is love, John now defines what love is and how it operates, according to the character of God.

**4:7-8** The first point John makes is that if we are born again in God, becoming His children and thus knowing God, then His love must be in us because God is love. John is not making an ontological statement that God literally is love. The point is that without God there is no love, and God cannot be anything other than love as a God of justice, righteousness, light, and truth. God is not part love, part wrath, part justice, but all of these things at once. Though we do not love in the same way God does, the incentive is to pursue the love of God so that it will become a reality lived out in our life.

**4:9-10** The second point John makes is that the ultimate definition of what love is and the way God revealed His love in our lives is the sacrifice of His son on the cross for all humanity. God’s justice and holiness demand that we be damned, but because of His character of love He died for us. This is why truth is so important. Though we move further away from Him, it was God who took the initiative to pursue us—not because we were lovable but because He is love. Therefore, love is defined as pursuing and sacrificing for those who are unlovable.

In light of this definition of love, 1 Jn. 4:7-5:4a might read as follows:

“Dear friends, let us *lay down our lives* for one another, because *self-sacrifice* comes from God, and everyone who *does not demand his rights* has been fathered by God and knows God. Whoever does not *lay down his life but clings to his rights* does not know God, because God is *the very definition of self-sacrifice*. By this the *self-sacrifice* of God is revealed in us: that God sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is *self-sacrifice*: not that we *died for* God, but that he *died for* us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Dear friends, since God so *laid down his life for* us, we also ought to *lay down our lives for* one another. No one has ever seen God. If we *surrender our rights for the sake of* one another, God resides in us, and His *sacrifice* is made complete in us. By this we know that we reside in Him and He in us: in that He has given us of His Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent His Son to be the Savior of the world.

If anyone confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God resides in him and he in God. And we have come to know and trust the *sacrifice* God has *made for* us. God is *self-sacrifice*, and the one who resides in *self-sacrifice by surrendering his rights and even his very life* resides in God, and God in him. By this *the lifestyle of laying down our lives for one another* is made complete with us so that we may have confidence on the day of judgment, because just as Jesus is, so also we are in this world. There is no fear in *dying to yourself*. But perfect *self-sacrifice* drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears punishment has not been made complete in *self-sacrifice*. We *lay down our lives and surrender our rights for others* because He first *laid down his life and surrendered his rights for us*.

If anyone says, ‘*I would die for God,*’ yet *would not give up anything* for his fellow Christian, he is a liar. Because the one who does not *lay down his life* for his fellow Christian, whom he has seen, cannot *lay down his life for* God, whom he has not seen. And the commandment we

have from Him is this: Whoever *sacrifices everything for God* must also *sacrifice everything for his fellow Christian*.

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been fathered by God, and everyone who *is willing to lay down his life for the father is willing to lay down his life for the child* fathered by him. By this we know that we *are willing to lay to lay our lives down for the children of God*: whenever we *lay our lives down for God* and obey His commandments For this is the *self-sacrifice* of God: that we keep His commandments. And his commandments do not weigh us down, because everyone who has been fathered by God conquers the world.”

**4:11-12** The third point John makes is that God modeled love, so we must love. The fact that God first loved us becomes the incentive for us to pursue love. God is making us pure, and we will one day be pure, so we must pursue purity and love. God’s love comes to the completeness of its function when we love. God did not love the believers simply to shower them with love, but to redeem us into loving creatures. We demonstrate the character of God when we love; that is how others see God. We should be able to say, “Watch me, for my life has changed.”

“God’s love for us is perfected only when it is reproduced in us or (as it may mean) ‘among us’ in Christian fellowship.”<sup>17</sup>

“The love of God displayed in His people is the strongest apologetic that God has in the world.”<sup>18</sup>

**4:13-16** Here John links love and spirit/truth together. (Spirit has already been linked to the truth criteria—1 Jn. 4:1-6.) John moved from the truth of who Jesus is as the God/man (1 Jn. 1:1-4) who died for our sins (1 Jn. 1:5-2:2) to recognizing that who Jesus is is a function of God having sent him out of love. We know that we belong to and know God because we have confessed and placed our trust in these truths given to us through the spirit (1 Jn. 4:15) and have responded by living in love (1 Jn. 4:16).

**4:17-18** Here John links love and confidence in belonging to God. God’s love is complete in us as we love more and more, which shows that we have been saved and have changed, which give us confidence on the day of judgment. John is not telling us not to fear God, for the fear of God is a good thing (Prov. 1:7; Ecc. 12:13-14). The context is that we do not have to fear condemnation for our sin on the day of judgment because we belong to God and His Son who paid for our sins on the cross. Punishment on the day of judgment is reserved only for the one who does not know God, and so they fear that day.

**4:19-21** Here John links love and Christian conduct. When one realizes that loving his brother involves obeying the command to “love one another” (Jn. 13:34, 15:12, 17), it becomes evident that 1 Jn. 4:20 is really addressing the improper attempt to separate one’s love for God and obedience to God’s commands. Like John, Jesus also related keeping his commandments and remaining in his love as being one and the same (Jn. 15:9-10).

**5:1-4a** Here John links love, faith, obedience, truth in Jesus Christ, knowledge, and the new birth. The criteria for true spirituality are all of these things. John first dealt with them systematically, one by one throughout his letter, and now he crams them all together. John knows that people can mishandle the truth in a heartless way or can be so compassionate that the truth is lost. One can be moral and upright and disciplined but still never acknowledge sin. For John, all these ideas

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<sup>17</sup> John R. W. Stott. *The Epistles of John*, p. 164.

<sup>18</sup> F. F. Bruce. *The Epistles of John*, p. 109.

*together* are elementary Christianity. It is all or nothing. That is what is meant when we say that Jesus is Lord. The desire and effort to hold all of this in tension and live it out in actions is assurance that one knows and belongs to God and His Son.

“It is easy to have a kind of love to God which does not recognize the obligation to love one another. Such love for God falls short of being real love for Him, since it fails to obey His commandments.”<sup>19</sup>

“It is easy to test our love for God. How committed are we to being completely obedient to His will? That is the measure of our love.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> I. Howard Marshall. *The Epistles of John*, p. 226.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on 1 John*, p. 52.

## D. Testimony About the Son (5:4b-12)

At the end of the previous section (1 Jn. 5:4a) John introduced the idea that those who are fathered by God conquer the world. He uses this idea to transition into the topic of Jesus as the God-man conquering sin and death through the water and the blood.

John ends his letter with three critical elements of the faith: the correct object of faith (Jesus the Son of God, 1 Jn. 5:4b-12), the assurance of faith (1 Jn. 5:13), and the results of faith (1 Jn. 5:14-17). This section discusses the first of the three.

**5:4b-5** The first critical element of faith is that Jesus Christ is the object of our faith. It is our knowing that Jesus Christ is the God-man who died and conquered death that gives us confidence that we do not have to fear the world because He has already conquered it on our behalf. Jesus Christ has done all the work; we only need to trust in Him and live for Him. Once again, for John, faith begins with believing the right truths about God. Faith today is seen as a *private* belief of what is truth, which has no right to define truth in the public arena. For John, the truths in which people place their faith must be both a private and public truth for them to really make any difference in their life. People cannot experience the conquering power of Jesus Christ if He is only true for them in their private sphere of life.

**5:6** The truth about Jesus that must be embraced is that He came by both the water and the blood. “Water and blood” refer to the baptism and death of Jesus Christ the Son of God. The argument is interested in who Jesus is. The false teachers believed that Christ came upon Jesus *at* his baptism and left *at* his death. John, however, claims that Jesus was the Christ before and *through* His baptism and remained the Christ *through* His death and on. The only way that Jesus Christ could truly conquer death and then the world was if He was the God-man all throughout his life on earth and all the way through His resurrection.

The water and blood may also be an allusion to the death of Jesus Christ on the cross when the blood and water came out of His side, symbolizing that His death had provided atonement of sins and the Holy Spirit for all humanity (Jn. 19:34).

“Water in the Gospel of John is consistently used as a symbol for the Holy Spirit (John. 7:38-39). What the opponents were probably saying is that Jesus saved us by bringing the Holy Spirit. What the author of 1 John is saying is that Jesus saved us by dying on the cross. For John the *water and the blood* refers to the outpouring of blood and water that came forth from Jesus’ side after he died on the cross (John 19:34). Jesus’ sacrificial death was a necessary and vital part of his saving work and could not be dispensed with (as the opponents were apparently claiming).”<sup>21</sup>

The reference to the Spirit goes back to when John the Baptizer pointed to the Spirit’s (dove) testimony (Jn. 1:29-34) about Jesus. This testimony shows that God was the One who brought all these things to pass.

**5:7-8** There are some who do not believe that these verses belong here since they do not appear in the most reliable early manuscripts. However, these verses do tie together the three testimonies mentioned.

“1 Jn. 5:7-8 is “found only in eight late MSS, four of which have the words in a marginal note. Most of these MSS (2318, 221, and [with minor variations] 61, 88, 429, 629, 636, and 918) originate from the 16th century; the earliest MS, codex 221 (10th century) includes the

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<sup>21</sup> W. Hall Harris. *1, 2, 3 John: Comfort and Counsel for a Church in Crisis*, p. 211.

reading in a marginal note, added sometime after the original composition. Thus, there is no sure evidence of this reading in any Greek MS until the 1500's."<sup>22</sup>

**5:9-10** These three testimonies are incredibly significant because they come from God, and His testimony is greater than that of men (false teachers). 1 Jn. 5:10 should be seen as a parenthetical statement to 1 Jn. 5:9, expounding on what is "the testimony." The statement "we have taken these three into ourselves" does not mean that the Holy Spirit talks to people and confirms that they have salvation, for there are many spirits that could be talking to you and telling you that you are saved. Rather, this means that one knows that he has salvation because he has accepted these testimonies as truth and lives his life based on them. To deny the testimony of God as truth is to call Him a liar.

"The writer, then, cannot allow that one can profess belief in God, as did his opponents, and yet reject God's testimony to His own Son. Such rejection cannot be excused on the basis of ignorance. The evidence is too clear and weighty. Rather, it is the deliberate unbelief, the character of which in the end impugns the very being and character of God. If Jesus is not God's own Son in the flesh, then God is no longer the truth. He is a liar."<sup>23</sup>

**5:11-12** The message is that God has given eternal life through Jesus Christ the Son of God and Him alone. The one who receives and builds his life on this truth receives the Son and has eternal life, and the one who rejects this truth does not have the Son or eternal life.

This is why everything that John has been saying all along is so important; Jesus as a sacrifice is radically different in our lives than Jesus as a giver of knowledge. If you do not get right who Jesus the God-man and Son of God is, then you cannot make sense of the cross. If His death was not a sacrifice but an accident, then everything in Christianity dissolves. This event in space and time is not a private truth but affects and shapes all of time and humanity.

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<sup>22</sup> W. Hall Harris. *1, 2, 3 John: Comfort and Counsel for a Church in Crisis*, p. 214.

<sup>23</sup> Glenn W. Barker. "1 John" in *Hebrews-Revelation*, Vol. 12 of *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 352.

## E. Assurance of Eternal Life (5:13-21)

John introduced the idea of assurance of eternal life at the end of the previous section (1 Jn. 5:12). He uses this idea to transition into the topic of how we know we have assurance of eternal life. This section discusses the last two critical elements of the faith: the assurance of faith (1 Jn. 5:13) and the results of faith (1 Jn. 5:14-17).

**5:13** The second critical element of faith for believers who accept the testimony of God is that they can be assured that they belong to Him and have eternal life. The first question asks how believers know that they have assurance. Luther taught that assurance is a function of faith. If you really have faith and trust in God to save you, then your very faith becomes your assurance. The Puritans pondered how you can know your faith is really genuine. They said that you can know your faith is genuine because you have been changed and there are now works and fruits that follow. There is also the Spirit that speaks to you and testifies to this genuineness.

The next question asks why a person needs assurance. The reason for this question is that there is doubt. What are the causes of doubt? If you have lost sight of the cross, then you go back to the foundational truths of who Jesus is as the God-man and that He atoned for your sins on the cross through His death and resurrection. If there is a sin in your life, then feeling shame, guilt, and conviction is a testament to your salvation. However, a true believer will never feel assurance until he deals with the sin in his life (1 Jn. 2:3, 26-27; 3:10, 18-19; 4:13).

The believer always lives with the tension expressed by John Newton, hymn-writer of “Amazing Grace”: “I am not what I ought to be...I am not what I hope to be. But still, I am not what I used to be. And by the grace of God, I am what I am.” Feeling this tension is also a testament to one’s assurance.

**5:14-15** The third critical element of faith for believers who accept the testimony of God is that they can expect results in their lives. The first result is that the believer has confidence that when they request things of God according to His will, then He will hear them, and that when He hears them, He will respond as well. Praying according to God’s will means that that we join God in what He wants to accomplish through the redemption of creation and humanity (Matt. 6:9-13).

**5:16-17** John does not specifically state that we should pray for the end of sin in others’ lives and their forgiveness. However, there is a sin that leads to death that we should not pray for. One view regarding this enigmatic sin is that it is a sin that leads to premature physical death, which a believer can experience if they keep committing this sin. Although there are mentions of this elsewhere in the Second Testament (Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 5:5, 11:29-30), it is not clear anywhere in the context that physical death is what John has in mind. In Rev. 3:1 death is seen as spiritual and shows that John may have this in mind. Likewise, there is no mention of what these sins are, so how would one know how to pray? Given the context, the end of 1 Jn. 5:16 should be seen as somewhat of a parenthetical statement. Those who have committed this sin are the opponents, whom John has called unbelievers repeatedly (1 Jn. 2:19, 3:14-15, 3:17). The opponents claimed to be believers but departed into the world (1 Jn. 4:1, 5), which is darkness and death (Jn. 3:19-20, 1 Jn. 3:14b). Their sin is the refusal to believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God (Jn. 20:31; 1 Jn. 5:12) and in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:30-32), a sin that cannot be forgiven because it denies the only means of forgiveness there is. It is clear that when John talks about life in this letter he is referring to eternal life, so death would clearly be eternal as well. Notice in the Farewell Discourse (Jn. 13-17), when Jesus prayed for the disciples and the future believers, He excluded the world (Jn. 17:9). It is possible to know the full revelation and gospel of God revealed through His Son but to then reject it and become hardened and so to never come to a saving

knowledge of Jesus Christ (Heb. 6:1-8). For believers, it is important to know that all unrighteousness is sin even though they are saved but that this sort of sin will not result in death because they have placed their trust in Jesus Christ who atoned for their sin (Jn. 3:16; 1 Jn. 1:5-2:2).

**5:18** John just said previously that believers do sin (1 Jn. 5:16), so when he says here that the believers do *not* sin, he must be referring to the sin leading to death committed by the opponents, which is the rejection of Jesus Christ as the God-man. The significance is that genuine believers cannot commit this sin because “God protects the one He has fathered and the evil one cannot touch him.” This provides great assurance for the believer who loves God and others.

**5:19-20** The second result of faith is the certainties that believers have through Jesus Christ. (1) We know that we belong to God because of who He is and what He has done for us and in us. (2) Even though the world belongs to the evil one, he cannot touch us. Even though Christ has won a major victory through the cross, the evil one is still ruler of this world; we need not worry, however, for we belong to God and are protected by Him (1 Jn. 5:4b-5, 18). (3) We know that the Son of God has come and that He is not a myth or story. (4) We know that the Son of God lives in us and has given us insights to know God. (5) We know that we are in a relationship with God and His Son who makes this possible. (6) We know that Jesus Christ is the true God and brings true eternal life.

**5:21** The third result of faith is the perseverance of the believers in Jesus Christ. John ends the letter with this odd statement that at first reading seems out of place. John knows that his readers—Gentiles being brought out of that life and Jews who feared exile—did not want to be associated with idols. He uses that abhorrence of idolatry to drive home the point of what denying the truth of Jesus Christ as the God-man and Son of God really is. Any vision of God short of the vision of the God who has disclosed Himself through His prophets and ultimately His Son (Heb. 1:1-4) is idolatry. You can talk about Jesus and spirituality and God all you want, but if you do not accept God’s image revealed through His Son, then you are an idolater. False views and teachings of Jesus Christ are idolatry, so in some way the whole letter has been a warning against idolatry and an exhortation to stay true to the one true God.

“False teaching is ultimately ‘apostasy from the true faith.’ To follow after it is to become nothing better than an idol worshiper, especially if it is a matter of the truth of one’s conception of God. The author is blunt. The false teachers propose not the worship of the true God, made known in his Son Jesus, but a false god—an idol they have invented.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Glenn W. Barker. "1 John." In *Hebrews-Revelation*. Vol. 12 of *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 357.

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